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Work climate as related to the performance and retention of hard-core unemployed workers

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A great deal of emphasis is currently placed upon training the hard-core unemployed (HCU) by providing them with adaptive skills. Adaptive skills are defined as "those which concern the person's relationship to himself and his environment" (Brenner, 1968). This focus proceeds partially on the assumption that training the man to adapt to his job environment is a sufficient method. It places less emphasis upon the exploration of job situational variables, such as the degree to which the job climate in which the HCU is placed is conducive to high work performance, or allows him to implement his adaptive skills. It is possible, for example, that beyond a certain point it is more efficient to attempt to effect change in the job climate rather than to train the HCU to adapt to this climate. This study attempts to explore the climate in which HCU workers are placed and the degree to which this climate is conducive to performance and retention on the job.

The specific purposes of the research were (1) to compare perceptions by the HCU and his supervisor of the work climate in which the HCU is placed, and (2) to explore the relationships between the performance of the HCU and the nature of his work climate. Further data are also provided on the inter-relationship of various criteria of the HCU's work performance. Thus, the primary question to which this study was directed is: In what way and to what extent does job climate effect the performance of the HCU worker?

The sample for this research was composed of 24 matched pairs of the HCU and his respective supervisor in a variety of organizations. The sample was drawn from a larger group (used in a broader longitudinal study) which had the following demographic

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characteristics: 84% Negro, 7% Puerto Rican, 7% white, average education was completion of 10th grade; average duration of unemployment prior to job placement was 15 weeks; 23% had prior police records (exclusive of traffic and minor violations); 25% were married; and 70% had no dependents.

Job Climate

Climate is conceptualized as an interaction of personal factors (personality, needs, values, etc.) and organizational properties (structure, supervisory practices, objectives, etc). This relationship emphasizes the role of perception of organizational properties as an intervening variable (Forehand and von Gilmer, 1964). Central importance is assigned to organizational characteristics only as they are perceived by the employee. Thus, variables such as structure and supervisory practices interact with personality to produce perceptions, and it is only through these perceptions that the relationship between the two may be understood (Likert, 1961).

Of particular concern in this study was the perception by the HCU of the degree to which his work climate was supportive. Preliminary interviews with HCU's indicated that one of the components of the organization climate most relevant to the HCU's retention and performance was the degree to which they perceived the organization climate as supportive. Specifically three aspects of a supportive climate seemed most salient: (1) new worker treatment, (2) support from peer workers, and (3) support from his supervisor. In regard to the first two of these variables, preliminary interviews indicated that peer workers seemed to play a key role in the HCU's job retention. His peer group existed in a sub-culture with a set of norms which demanded conformity. If these norms rejected the new worker or were rejected by the new worker, group retaliation could result which might lead to his discharge or even to his physical injury on the job. Examples of these are well known to workers by the terms "burying the guy" (with extra work), not "carrying" a new man during his

initial probationary period (covering for his mistakes by making it look like another was at fault), or "beaning" a new worker by (accidentally) dropping tools on him. Preliminary interviews similarly indicated that support by the HCU's supervisor or lack of it was of key importance in determining whether a worker succeeded or failed at learning his tasks and maintaining his job. The patience and backing of the supervisor and his ability to protect or formally expose a worker appeared to be potential correlates of job retention.

The specific items which comprised each of the three climate measures are listed below. Response options for each item were on a five-point multiple choice Likert scale.

1. How are new workers at your plant generally treated? (New Worker Treatment)

They are usually made to prove themselves (-)
They are usually given more breaks than others (+)
They are usually treated like all the others (+)
They are usually given a hard time (-)

2. What's it like to work where I work? (Support from Peers)

Each guy has to pretty much take care of himself (-)
Other workers give you a hand and help you if you don't know how to do something (+)
Almost everybody gets along well with everybody else (+)
Most of the workers are hard to get close to (-)
It's not so smart to make buddies here because people tend to take advantage of you (-

3. What's it like to work where I work? (Support from Supervisor)

To get ahead, you have to "brown nose" (-)
Supervisors would just as soon get rid of you rather than teach you or help you on a job (-)

Job Performance

Three different criteria of the HCU's job performance were obtained: job retention, work effectiveness and work behavior. Job retention was considered relevant since one of the major problems claimed in regard to the employment of the HCU is an unusually short duration on the job. The work effectiveness criterion was composed of supervisory

ratings of four characteristics, each of which was measured by two items: competence (performs his job competently and follows instructions), congeniality (is friendly and agreeable), effort (tries to do his best and works carefully), reliability (shows up each work day, shows up on time). The HCU's supervisor was given the following instructions in this rating: "Compared to other employees doing the same or similar work (or at a similar skill level), how would you rate this employee on each of the following:" The multiple choice format ranged in equal percentile intervals from "top 20%" to "bottom 20%".

The work behavior criterion was designed to determine the supervisor's general description of the HCU as a person in the work situation. The work behavior criterion was composed of three component characteristics of the HCU as (1) smart (he knows what's going on in life, he does whatever he does well, he knows how to do many things, he is smart); (2) friendly (he is a good friend to people, he is a friendly person); (3) conscientious (he wants to do his best, he does a careful job, he wants to do a good job). A five-point multiple choice Likert type scale followed each of these items.

Results

In Table 1, the dramatic differences between the HCU's and his supervisor's perceptions of supportiveness of the immediate work climate is illustrated. Perceptions by the newly employed HCU of the lack of supportiveness provided to new workers is particularly noticeable. In the case of all three climate variables, the difference in perception is at least two full scale points (on a five-point scale), and in all cases the critical ratio of the differences exceeds eight. It is apparent that the HCU perceives his work climate as vastly less supportive than does his supervisor.

TABLE 1

Comparison of Perceptions of Work Climate
Held by the Hard-Core Unemployed (HCU) and their Supervisors

Components of work climate	Perceptions of work climate held by		Difference
	HCU	Supervisors	
New worker treatment	1.9	4.0	2.1**
Support from peer workers	2.5	4.5	2.0**
Support from supervisor	2.6	4.9	2.3**

** $p<.01$, N=24 matched pairs of workers and their supervisors

TABLE 2

Relationships Between Perceptions Held by the Hard-Core Unemployed (HCU) of their Work Climate and their Supervisor's Evaluation of their Work Performance

Perception of his work climate by the HCU	Supervisor's evaluation of HCU's work performance						
	Comparative rating of work effectiveness				Perception of HCU's behavior		
	Competence	Congeniality	Effort	Reliability	Smart	Friendly	Conscientious
New worker treatment	.49**	.49**	.16	-.03	.43*	.57**	.49**
Support from peer workers	.48**	.55**	.24	-.24	.26	.60**	.40*
Support from supervisor	.61**	.56**	.45*	-.07	.54**	.63**	.58**
Number of weeks worked	-.20	-.12	-.12	-.60**	-.23	-.20	-.13

*p<.05, p**<.01; N=24

Table 2 indicates that HCU's who perceive their climate as supportive also tend to be rated by their supervisor more favorably in terms of work effectiveness and work behavior. Those HCU's who perceive their climate as supportive are consistantly rated as more competent and congenial than their fellow workers, and as having the general behavioral characteristics of being smart, friendly, and conscientious. HCU's who perceive their climate as supportive also show some tendency to be rated as exerting their best effort on the job. The only supervisory rating unrelated to work climate appears in the area of worker reliability, where three negative (but non-significant) correlations appear.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in Table 2 is that which indicates zero to negative relationships between supervisory ratings of work effectiveness/work behavior and job retention. Those HCU's who are rated as most reliable ("he shows up each day", "he shows up on time") by their supervisors tend to have a relatively short duration on the job. Or conversely, those who remain on the job tend to be rated as less reliable by their supervisor.

Discussion

Two findings from this study might be highlighted since they point toward potentially serious issues in the job performance and retention of the hard-core unemployed. One of these is the wide gap in perceptions between the HCU and his supervisor concerning the degree to which the work climate is a supportive one. A second issue concerns the lack of any positive relationship between the supervisor's evaluation of the HCU and the HCU's job retention. Of particular concern is the high negative relationship between the HCU's job retention and his reliability as evaluated by his supervisor. An unreliable HCU in this study was one who showed up late for work or did not show up at all. Such behavior might be the HCU's avoidance reaction to a job climate he finds particularly uncomfortable and unsupportive (an

indicated in Table 1). Those who are reliable tend to find the situation intolerable after a short period. They are rated as reliable by their supervisor but soon leave the organization. Others cope with the unfavorable climate by coming in late or by being absent. They remain with the organization but are rated as unreliable by their supervisor.

Supervisors generally rated HCU's higher on competence, congeniality, and effort than on reliability. Thus, when the HCU is present on the job, his performance is comparable to that of other employees; the problem is his unreliability (absence and lateness), not his competence.

These issues may indicate a lack of direct communication and understanding between the HCU and his supervisor concerning specific factors in the work climate of mutual concern to them. One specific topic for discussion between these two parties might be a full exploration of the differences in their perception of the degree of supportiveness in the work climate. A second topic might focus upon the concerns of each party about the HCU's unreliability, and the conflicts that reliability on the job might create for the HCU. In such discussions, the supervisor might consider and talk about various means of introducing changes into the job environment which would increase the supportiveness of the job climate conducive to greater reliability. Thus, increasing the supportiveness of the job climate seems to be a major avenue for increasing performance; and the implementation of these changes lies less in increasing the HCU's competence than in exploring the low reliability (absence and lateness) he demonstrates in response to his climate.

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